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Entered May 22, 1902, as second-class matter, Post Office at New York, N. Y., Act of Congress of March 3d, 1879.

Vol. XXIII. No. 4. APRIL, 1908. Whole No 115

# THE ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

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PUBLISHED BY

THE ARCHITECTURAL RECORD CO.

President, Clinton W. Sweet Treasurer, F. W. Dodge
Vice-Pres. & Genl. Mgr., H. W. Desmond Secretary, F. T. Miller

11-15 EAST 24TH STREET, MANHATTAN

Telephone, 4430 Madison Square

**Subscription (Yearly) $3.00** **Published Monthly**

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

THE ARCHITECTURAL RECORD CO. NEW YORK

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

**OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: No. 11 EAST 24th STREET, NEW YORK CITY**

**WESTERN OFFICE: 841 MONADNOCK BLDG., CHICAGO, ILL.**

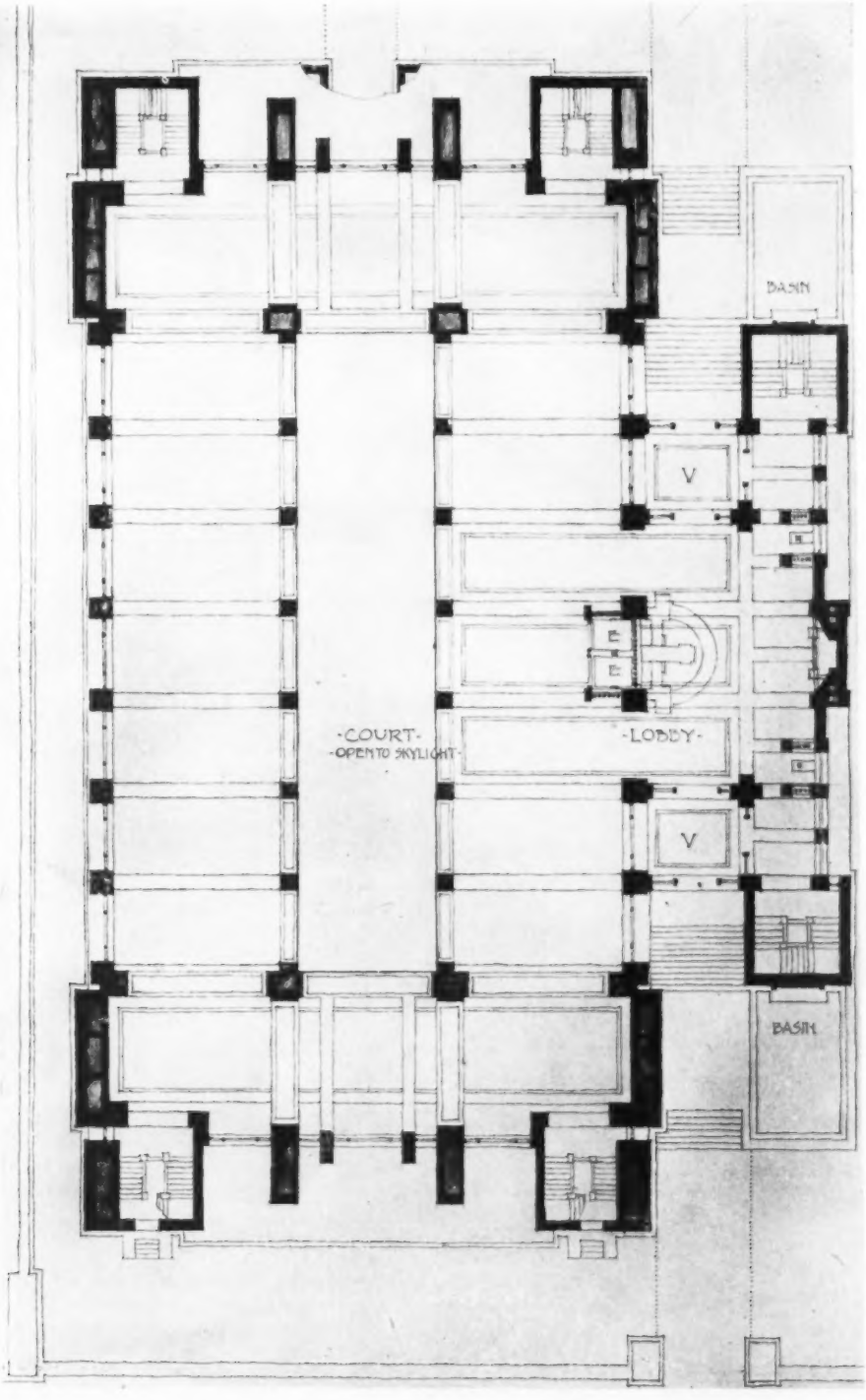


FIG. 8. LARKIN BUILDING—MAIN FLOOR PLAN.

Buffalo, N. Y. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect.

# The Larkin Building in Buffalo

This business building, the architectural creation of Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright of Chicago, is reproduced in many excellent photographs, some of which will be shown in this article and others in the March number of the Architectural Record. From among them I select Fig. 1 as the most capable of giving a general idea of the design. The plan given in Fig. 8 shows the purpose of each member of the building, and the scale can be estimated as to the heights, on the basis afforded by the steps of the entrance doorways, checked by the height of the doorway (seen in Fig. 1) themselves, and by comparison with the plan. It is not safe to utilize the courses of brick in this way, because their height is uncertain; the bricks may be of unusual dimension or laid with unusually wide joints. The nearest tower-like mass in Fig. 1—that against which the telegraph pole is seen relieved—is about 90 feet high. The broader mass behind it would be, then, about 110 feet high, and this appears to be the highest level of the walls. A perspective draughtsman can easily determine the relative proportions, as width compared to height, etc., but this front may be taken, in the absence of any figure dimensions on the plan, roughly as 90 to 95 feet in width, not, of course, including the north wing seen in Fig. 2.

That front shown in Fig 1 is called in this paper the east front. The longer side, showing in the same picture seven windowed bays divided by square buttress-piers, is called here the south flank.

It is possible to gain some knowledge of the character of the building by means of photos of the interior. Twenty excellent interior views are found in the collection above mentioned, and Fig. 3 shows how the building has a nave and aisles—the nave shown in the illustrations having windows at the ends, and a skylight overhead; each aisle is divided up into four lofts or stories of 16 to 17 feet each, in the clear. The broad end windows, seen in Fig. 3 at the end of the great hall, are the same windows that show in Figs. 1 and 2 between the buttresses, and they correspond with the arrangement of the south front, as in Fig. 1—note the four stories of broad windows flanked by narrower ones, which are seen within and without alike. One relation between exterior and interior is seen in this—the square brick piers which divide what we here call the nave from the galleries at each side—a long double row of them are on the same axes as the buttress-like piers crowned by globes and human sculpture, in Figs. 1 and 2.

In Fig. 3 there are partly seen the large galleries, at the left and at the right hand of the central skylighted nave. These halls are of only moderate height—one story of windows to each, as seen in Fig. 4, which gives the interior of the fourth story, south side. Each one, as well as the floor of the high nave, is filled rather closely with desk-tables, at which are seen seated clerks fully occupied in their employ. In this view, we are looking eastward, the wondow on the left and in face of us are those seen from outdoors in Fig.1, and the central nave is north of us, on our right.

The western end of the building is very closely like the east front; but the northern side as shown in Fig. 2 is masked by projecting masses of building which include a great vestibule with entrance doorways to east and west. In the northeast detail view, Fig. 5, the doorway at the head of the steps where a young man is standing is one of those two entrances; it has the firm name on the large fan-light, and is probably the working entrance. The plan shows a similar doorway at the west of this one, and opposite to it. The houses of the town and a church crowd the site rather closely on the northern side.

The square towers at either end and flanking the entrance in Fig. 5 are about 18 feet in horizontal dimension. That one seen in Fig 5 has the overplus of water very skilfully treated as a cascade

with a sculptural setting. The two outer towers, seen in Fig. 1, have small doorways, with steps of approach. These are ventilator and stairway towers, and that with the fountain contains also a staircase.

In tracing the analysis of this building through all this pile of photographs, and in setting down, as above, its scheme, we have also partly prepared ourselves to judge of it as a work of architecture. The lover of architecture who looks, perhaps for the first time, at a building so entirely removed as this one from the traditional styles and schools feels a shock of surprise, and this a surprise which is the reverse of pleasant. Few persons who have seen the great monuments of the past, or adequate photographs of them; who have loved them and have tried to surprise their secret of artistic charm, will fail to pronounce this monument, as seen in Fig. 1, an extremely ugly building. It is, in fact, a monster of awkwardness, if we look at its lines and masses alone. It is only capable of interesting that student who is quite aware that the architects of

FIG. 1. LARKIN OFFICE BUILDING—REAR.

Buffalo, N. Y. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect.

the modern world during fifty years of struggle have failed to make anything of the old system—the system of following the ancient styles with the avowed purpose of developing some one of them and going on to other things.

For such a task, the as yet unperformed duty of making comely a hard working and economical building, the designer might feel that Roman colonnading was out of the question, as extravagant in cost and waste of space, and the frankly arcuated styles of the Middle Ages unavailable for similar or equally cogent reasons. He might find his only available suggestion from old times in the seventeenth century Italian, and the eighteenth century French palaces—in styles which depended upon fenestration. And then he might well say that he was tired of seeing imitations of those monuments; that the popular and successful architects of the time have filled our cities with such an array of feeble school studies, based upon plans good in themselves but powerless to suggest an architectural treatment of the whole, that he will have none of that pseudo style.

Admitting, then, that the chase of the Neo-Classic, of the Gothic, of the French Romanesque, has come to nothing, that we are as far as we were in 1850 from a living style of architecture, and even from anything which is worthy to be called architecture at all, when a large mass of the work of a period is taken together, we shall find that the building we are considering puts on a new aspect.

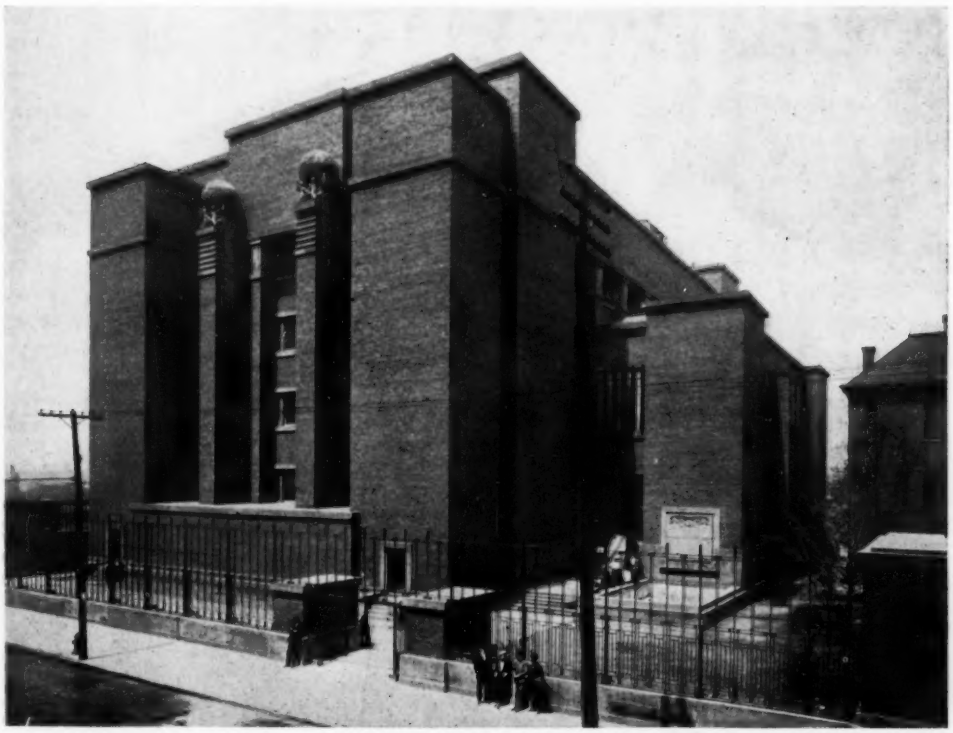

FIG. 2. LARKIN OFFICE BUILDING—FRONT.
Buffalo, N. Y. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect.

Do we find in this building none of those familiar motives—those accepted details which are architecture for us? It is because the designer of this building was determined to furnish nothing which his practical requirements did not call for. Is there no visible proof? It is be-

FIG. 3. LARKIN BUILDING—CENTRAL COURT.

Buffalo, N. Y. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect.

cause a flat roof is just as easy to make tight and durable, with modern appliances of building, and because a swarm of skylights and other utilitarian openings are better and more easily accommodated in and upon a flat roof. As there are no chimneys, giving an opportunity for an agreeable breaking of the masonry into the sky and the sky into the masonry? It is because there are no separate fires, each fire requiring its own flue, and that flue carried well above all obstructions. There is probably one fire, and one only, in the building; moreover, that one fire is driven by a forced draught and requires no tall chimney shaft to make it burn. Is there no system of fenestration—the windows, and therewith the doors, showing in pretty groups or in long-drawn sequence carefully balancing one another? That is because the building consists of five equal stories, used for similar purposes; divided generally into long, unbroken halls—lofts, in short; and because it seems a feeble thing to do—to break up the arrangement of windows *merely* for the sake of pretty proportions. Are the grouped rooms and closets of utility arranged, even at the expense of the building, by thrusting forward their crude masses to mask and distort, what might have been the effect of the main structure, all as seen in Fig. 2? That is because this is to be an economical, working building, the offices of a great business house, and because it was thought well to be resolute in the chosen way and not to pretend to build a monument of architecture when a working structure was desired.

FIG. 4. LARKIN BUILDING—FOURTH STORY GALLERY.
Buffalo, N. Y. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect.

It is, indeed, quite certain that in New York the newly erected business building at the corner of Wall Street and Broadway, shown in Fig. 7, is more nearly like what a business building ought to be than the elaborated and delicately detailed skyscrapers around. It is certain that nothing is gained to architecture by trying to make a business

building architectural in the good old sense. The fine arts have nothing to do with the hustle and bustle of daily bread-winning operations. Those are hostile influences, as Ruskin pointed out much more than half a century ago; or it might be urged with still greater force that fine art and active mercantile pursuits are mutually exclusive. If you are to enjoy a work of art you must have leisure and a quiet mind; if you are to produce a work of art you must have peace and a single mind. In neither case will it do to have hanging over you the

FIG. 5. LARKIN OFFICE BUILDING—DETAIL OF ENTRANCE.
Buffalo, N. Y. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect.

peremptory calls of the money-making organization—not one paymaster, who might perhaps forget his utilitarian requirements in the light of design and the joy of creation; but the commercial enterprise which can have no enthusiasm and no care for finer things than commerce.

We are left, then, with our sympathies enlisted in Mr. Wright's behalf, to consider what else might have been done, had the architect felt that he could not bear to turn out a building so ungainly, so awkward in grouping, so clumsy in its parts and in its main mass. Rejecting all that older styles have to offer us in the way of construction and in the way of detail, we may still ask, How did the designers work when men knew how to design? What, apart at least from the unconscious following of the style accepted during this period was their main object? They sought for light and shade. The interesting treatment of light and shade, the production of graceful and simple combinations of light and shade was their chief aim. A thought in architecture is generally a thought in light and shade.

When the great buildings of the world were designed everything else which was capable of design received it; and all design in pure form, as in sculpture, in relief modeling, in grouping and massing, is design in light and shade. The simple requirements of every-day life were met by the maker of vessels and utensils with as free and as successful a method of designing as the requirements of state and of religion; and he worked in form principally, that is, in light and shade. Earthen vessels and metal utensils were gracefully designed. And all this not because the maker cared greatly to produce a decorative object, for he also was dimly conscious of the fact that it was hardly worth while to waste design on a working tool, but because it was in-

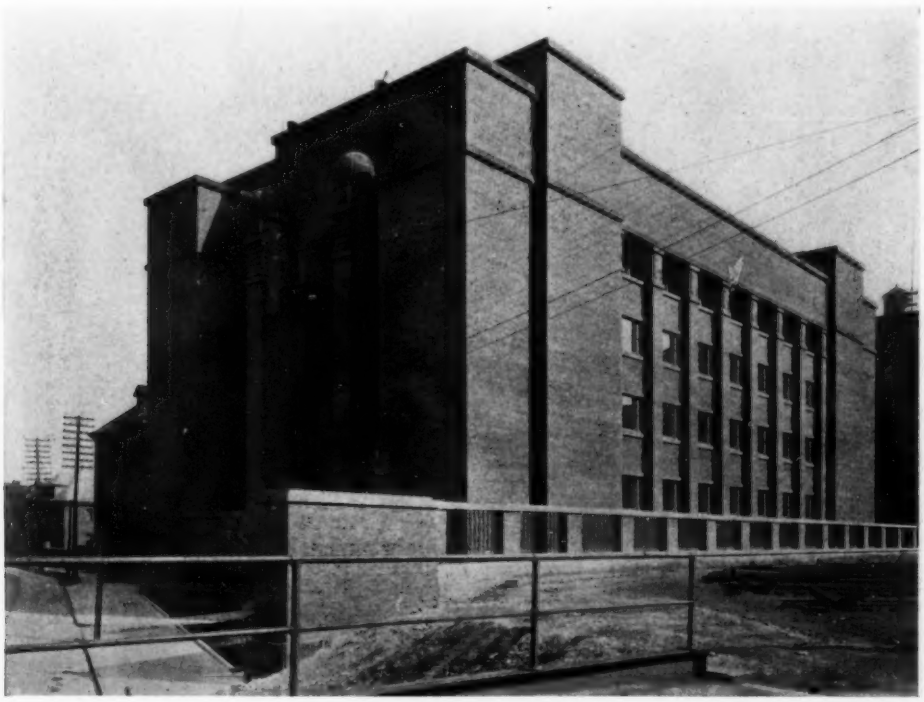

FIG. 6. LARKIN OFFICE BUILDING—REAR.

Buffalo, N. Y. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect.

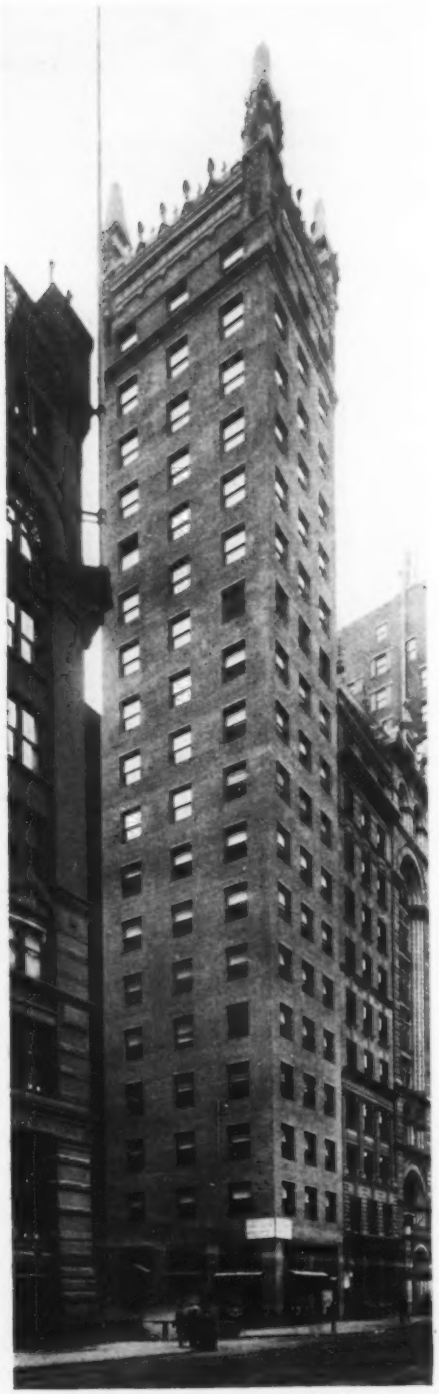

FIG. 7. NO. 1 WALL STREET BUILDING.
New York City.
Barnett, Haynes & Barnett, Architects.

evitable that a man who did fine things on a Monday would still do comely things on a Tuesday. How can you make a clumsy and an awkward thing if you have made graceful ones for forty-eight hours on end? It is a blessed trait of our nature that good habits as well as bad habits may be formed and will stick. And so the designs of a good time for architectural art are sure to be good designs, that is, to have such forms that the light and shade upon them would be lovely. The design before us could not have been made by any able man at a time when there prevailed a worthy style of design in the world around him.

One may try, comparing these seven or eight views of the exterior—one may try the experiment of familiarity to see whether with longer acquaintance the building is less ugly than it seems at the first look. Ruskin tells the story of his having been led astray by the theory of Use and Wont—by the notion that our liking for certain forms and colors is the result of familiarity, and nothing else, and he says that he kept a skull on his mantelpiece for months, but found it just as ugly when the months had passed. And so it is in all probability with this exterior. If we are to consider it as a piece of abstract form, as a thing which is itself ugly or the reverse, the opinion will remain fixed that nothing uglier could exist among objects that were found perfect in condition, cared for, and showing the signs of human thought and purpose. We should see in a moment that where such qualities as those are found to exist, the building cannot be wholly contemptible. That it is wholly repellant as a work of human artisanship which might have been a work of art and is not—so much is probably the verdict of most persons who care for the fine art of architecture.

Light and shade have been mentioned above as the chief elements in our art, and one of the ways in which light and shade are used continually in architectural design is in the way of moldings. What is a molding? What are moldings? It is, they are, a modulation of the surface following continuous lines, straight and curved. Moldings are an abandonment of plane and uniform surface for a

broken and generally rounded surface, as along an edge, and a group of moldings consists of an alternation of projecting and retreating forms, mainly of curved surface and of small dimension, although these are broken, interspersed here and there by narrow strips of flat and uniform surface, which we call fillets. Moldings do not weaken the wall where the window jamb, the door jamb, the horizontal cornice or sill course is modified by their interposition. Suppose, for instance, that one who lived opposite this Larkin Building were to have his way for a month, and were to utilize his time in making the building less clumsy in his eyes—would he not begin by molding those square corners which are thrust upon us so sharply in all the exterior views, working those corners into upright beads and coves, developing, perhaps, in an angle shaft with capital and base? This, of course, is not an essential feature. To insert it would be to give, perhaps, too nearly mediaeval a look to the design. Suppose that the corners of one of those tower-like masses were molded to such an extent that eight inches on each side of the arris, everywhere, were to be reduced to a series of soft surfaces, concave and convex, parallel one to another, and carried up from a little above the base to a little below the coping? They may be cast in brick, two or three separate patterns of molded brick sufficing for the whole composition. These moldings must either stop or return; and there are very interesting ways of arranging for either. They may stop against the stone coping or belt course itself; or they may have a piece of cast brick or of terra-cotta or of cut stone, in the mass of which the stop of the groups of moldings may be against a splay or a concave or a convex curved surface.

Moldings are important and valuable, and the designer who rejects them altogether handicaps himself—and yet there are even better things than moldings. The horizontal bands in a building like this would be interesting if they were molded; and yet they would be more interesting still if they were carried out in some greater projection in the face of the building and supported on corbels or on a little arcade. But it is evident that the first principle laid down by the designer for his own guidance was this —to avoid everything that would look like a merely architectural adornment, to add nothing to the building for the sake of architectural effect. He would repel the idea of a projecting cornice as readily as he would the full classical entablature for the top of one of these square towers, which would be no better working elements of the building if they were so adorned. Either you must add to a building something which is unnecessary, and which nothing but existing tradition even suggests to you, or you must have a bare, sharp-edged pile of blocks—a group of parallelopipedons like this. The designer seems to have said that even the rounding off of the coping shall be eschewed. He has determined that the square corner, the right angle, the straight edge, the sharp arris, the firm vertical and horizontal lines, unbroken, unmodified, uncompromizing in their geometrical precision—that these and these only shall be the features of his building. But as that characteristic of the building prevents it from having any delicate light and shade, therefore it stands condemned in the eyes of any person who looks at the building asking for beauty of effect.

There is, however, mass. There is the possibility of proportion, the proportion of the smaller to the greater, and the possibility of fitting one to another firmly and with grace. There is the proportion obtainable by the horizontal distribution, the alternating of curtain walls with towers, of projecting and receding masses; and there is the possibility of vertically succeeding masses, the parts which serve for a kind of basement at either end, and those towers and buttresses which rise above them. There is even a possibility of contrast between walls filled with windows and the massive blank space of the wall which rests upon the piers between the windows.

If, now, we seek to take up a sympathetic position, to consider the building as perhaps the architect himself consid-

ered it, there are to notice the care given to the plan and disposition of the halls and rooms, the care which has evidently resulted in a successful utilitarian building. Construction which is the simplest and most obvious, and which cannot go astray because everything is reduced to the post and lintel; workmanship which is faultless, simple and straightforward brickwork; piers and walls fairly and smoothly built; slabs and beams of stone which have been planed and dressed in the mill and left with sharp arrises; a view down the central hall as seen in Fig. 3, which is impressive because of the straightforwardness and simplicity of everything, and because of the clear daylight which fills all parts of the hall; the evidences which the pictures multiply of a minute prevision in the way of office furniture, safes and cupboards for filing papers, tables and chairs of metal and solid wood, all of the simplest conceivable forms; the electric bulbs set in racks at a convenient height above tables and counters, which racks, though of inconceivable ugliness, have yet the character of simple utility—all these things unite to make a building which no one can fail to accept. The iron railing which encloses the site comes nearer to being really a design than the larger details, generally; for in this a true economy and a sagacious utility take the place of a sense of form. Our standard is lower, when we consider some hundreds of running feet of fencing.

And so in the exterior it is allowable to the student to feel that a square brick shaft is as fit to contain a winding staircase or an elevator as a round or octagonal cut stone shaft costing five times the money; that windows are not absolutely necessary when there can be a skylight: and that where there are no windows, and no breaking up for windows without necessity, the result is inevitable—the result that there will be no pierced parapet nor any modifying of the uppermost story to replace in a way the cornice which, of course, such a building does not require. Here is a well-thought-out design, every detail of construction and all the appliances have been studied with care. Here is an excellent arrangement of large windows, raised high toward the ceiling, broad and low and shaped as they ought to be for utilitarian results. It is clear that there is nothing to burn about the building; it is as fireproof as such a building can be made. And while everything has been carried out with a view to practical utility, there has been also some attempt to adorn, to beautify. But we have already seen reason to think that this attempt has failed. See for the attempt and for the failure, in Fig. 8, that curious base arranged beneath the brick piers on the right; it is the Attic base reduced to its simplest form, the familiar old Attic base, with its rounded moldings turned back into the square-edged bands which those moldings were in their origin. And those square moldings are put in, the larger below and the smaller above, with the evident purpose of serving as ornament. Accepting this, let the eye now take in the curious square block decoration of the same pier in its upper part, higher than the door and between the great doorway of the entrance where the firm name is painted on the glass, and the small staircase doorway on the right. Is this a serious attempt to create a new system of design? May we assume that the inevitable squareness of the brick-built pier, all molded and specially cast brick being rejected, satisfies the designer so well that he gladly makes everything else, his sculptured ornaments and his bronze fittings, as square as the masses of brickwork? Look, then, at the system of metal frames in which the electric globes are suspended. From this picture go back to Fig. 3 and study those straight-edged and sharp-cornered groups of ornament at the tops of the great piers, and directly below the skylight see those square ornaments which are clearly nothing but ornaments. Fig. 4 shows two groups of those extraordinary connections—those terminals of the great supporting piers at the end of the high nave opposite the one shown in Fig. 3. It is unnecessary to describe the design of these strange masses of square-edged patterning; no human designer could make anything graceful or even

anything effective out of such elements as those. Taking all this accumulation of strange, sharp-edged solids, offering no modulation of surface—nothing but sharp contrast and checkered black and white—and the wonder will grow upon you more and more, how such a costly, careful, thoughtful, well-planned building should be made up of such incongruous parts, leading to such a hopeless result.

One cannot help liking broad surfaces of fair brickwork, and yet those very masses of brickwork may be so much more interesting; they may be invested with color. There is the third chance for the designer! After light and shade have escaped him, or have been rejected, deliberately, and when the artistic use of mass and proportion are out of the question, he has still at his disposal the interest and charm of color, and this exterior calls for it loudly. The careful brickwork, even as it is, has a certain momentary pleasure to offer those of us who feel dissatisfied with the flimsy character and the inappropriate ornament of the buildings around. Such a pleasure lasts but an instant, however. You turn from the florid façade to the plain brick gable wall or rear with a sense of relief, but it is merely an instantaneous pleasure which you feel in escaping from something painful. If we are to look at the building a second time, and that with renewed pleasure, we must have something else; and, where delicate play of light and shade is denied us, as here, variety of color pattern would be an admirable expedient. It is not necessary to expatiate on this view of the case, for any one who has ever made patterns in mosaic or has enjoyed the patterns that others have made for him will see what a pleasure this building might have been to the designer and to the student, had its grimness of aspect been modified by color patterns. Even the simple stripes found in the wall of that New York apartment house which faces on Fourth Avenue and East Sixty-eighth Street, three horizontal courses of dark brown brick, one of scarlet brick, and so on, in alternation, even that is beautiful. More elaborate, more effective combinations might be made where colored bonds pass through—cut across —groups of moldings.

*Russell Sturgis.*